MEMOIRS AND BIOGRAPHY

Notes of a Newsgatherer

FIFTY YEARS A JOURNALIST. By Melville E. Stone. Doubleday, Page & Co.

THIS big book, composed by a former general manager of the Associated Press, is easy to read in spite of its bulk and in spite also of its introduction of matter extraneous to the title. The ease is partly due to its author's long training. It is compiled like a page from the daily news with cross heads, headlines and dates. Everybody who opens it will read the book precisely as though it were a telling story in the newspaper. And that, however literary persons may regard the autobiography, is praise.

Mr. Stone has made a number of enemies in his long and useful career, and the reader who never made his personal acquaintance will know why from the book. The reason is his blunt expression of opinion. When he thinks a man is a blackguard he has no hesitancy in calling him just that, and in one place he courts notoriety by the bold ways, typographical and otherwise, in which he writes down his contemporaries in the journalistic fields. Several of these deceased persons were popular idols in their lives and an odor of sanctity, at least of reverence, hangs about them in their tombs.

But this writer calls one of them "shifty and wholly untruthful," another, "a malignant who frequently misused his power," two of them "revelled in indecency," while another was "little better than a blackguard." The men to whom he applies these epithets were, it must be remembered, among the makers of our modern newspaper.

Born in the "revolutionary" 1848, when Abraham Lincoln was serving his first term in the Federal Congress, Mr. Stone is proud to claim as his natal State that of the Great Emancipator, to whose broadcast fame he adds his mite. It is his belief that no one born out of Illinois can thoroughly understand or quite appreciate Lincoln, and he appends insufficient reasons for this conviction. As his father was a preacher the family often moved from one small place to another small place, with occasional sojourns in Chicago. The boy's education was, in consequence, fitfully carried on, but it would appear that he had always an ambition to acquire learning. What he got was painfully obtained.

For instance, while he was still only a growing lad, but obliged to help in the family finances, he used to get up at 4 in the morning, hurry to the mail room of the Chicago *Tribune*, take a bundle of papers for distribution walk four or five miles delivering them, reach home at 8 and have breakfast and then turn up at public school at 9. During this hard experience occurred the assassination of President Lincoln. A vast, excited crowd hemmed in the entrances to the newspaper office and the lad was obliged to force his way into the mail room by a kind of underground passage. Even that was crowded with vociferous and grief stricken people. While he was pushing his way through them young Stone heard a pistol shot and saw a man fall dead. The assassin exclaimed:

"He said Lincoln deserved it!"

Then he walked away, and nobody put out a hand to stop him, and, as the author affirms, he was never tried for the shooting.

Mr. Stone's busy journalistic life, not counting two or three boyish attempts, really lies between the dates 1871, when occurred the Chicago fire, and 1919, when the League of Nations was formed at Versailles. He was in the hardware business and wiped out of it by the great conflagration, and while waiting 'round for things to start up he served efficiently on a committee of relief. This led to acquaintance with the owner of the *Republican* and a managerial job thereon in connection with Col. Forrest, who wrote the editorials for the sheet.

In one of these Forrest offended a low grade politician as well as his chief, and he wrote a backing down editorial which the *Tribune* declared could only be due to "beer." It wound up Forrest's connection with the paper and probably Stone's, although he does not say so, but we find him shortly afterward in Washington on the staff of THE NEW YORK HERALD.

This was in 1874. A year later he is back in Chicago founding the *Daily News* (evening) on a capital of $5,000 furnished by a "remittance" man from England, one Percy Meggy. The first number of the celebrated paper was issued experimentally on Christmas Day, 1875. The first issue of the morning edition of the Chicago *Daily News*, a two cent paper, followed in 1881.

Between these dates the author tells at length some of his early detective "stunts" such as the Spencer case and his growing acquaintance with interesting crooks—Ross Raymond, the confidence man, and Dick Lane, a burglar, among others. He also passes in review notable political events in which he journalistically figured.

Sandwiched in also is a trip to Europe, where he made the acquaintance of Parnell, Dillon, Capt. Boycott, Gambetta, Clemenceau. Since what he found in these men at that time has been clarified by their subsequent actions, then this author possesses, among other valuable newspaper qualities, the best of them all, a true judgment of men.

More instructive to embryo journalists than anything else in the book is the delightful account of the daily meetings of the little *Daily News* family, of which Eugene Field was the side splitting star. Their earnest efforts to get the proper perspective on the news of the day and the cheerfulness with which they permitted each one to cut down the other's copy make charming reading as of a newspaper written, edited and published in the Better Land. The reminiscence reads veracious, but it would be hard to duplicate such a story in any other newspaper office.

In this connection Mr. Stone relates how his paper refused to buy the "Public Be Damned" story offered them by "a pushing and impertinent" free lance. In his offer the man had made the mistake of telling the *News* people the exact way he interrupted Vanderbilt's dinner, and by his persistence forced this expression of annoyance. Suppressing the details the free lance afterward sold the story to the *Tribune*.

Mr. Stone still chuckles over the hoax of a Matthew Arnold interview which the *Tribune* swallowed and published. The great critic was said to have described Chicago people as ill bred and illiterate in an interview he was reported to have given to a periodical that did not exist. This permits Mr. Stone to picture his own impression of the "Sweetness and Light" lecturer, which he winds up by repeating the *mot* of R. L. S. when told of Arnold's death. "Too bad," said Stevenson; "he won't like God."

The events from 1893, when he became manager of the Associated Press, down to his resignation are related by the author with equal cleverness and, as playwrights are advised to do, "never letting the interest drop." He gives in detail the early struggles of the "A. P." and its battles with its rival news gatherer, as well as full accounts of his various visits to royalty, the Kaiser, the Czar, when on tour for his association.

"What troubles England," said Wilhelm confidentially, "is MIG." These letters filled out spell "made in Germany." Mr. Stone seems to have preserved a pretty high opinion of the German Emperor, as he had a great sympathy for the unfortunate Czar.

One of the most amusing passages in the book relates a meeting with William Jennings Bryan on the borders of Mexico in 1896. Thither the great commoner had gone to study the silver question in its home. He hovered near the border talking to Mr. Stone for five hours, and, says the latter, in that short time Bryan solved the silver problem.

A rapid, incisive, *unstyled* book, valuable in many ways, but invaluable, perhaps, to newspaper workers.

Owen Johnson has taken a house in Bermuda for the winter, where he will be a next door neighbor of Mrs. Hodgson Burnett. While there Mr. Johnson will complete the writing of a new book which is what he himself calls "a logical projection" from "The Wasted Generation." This new book, we are told, will deal with the vital progressive force of the new post-war generation.

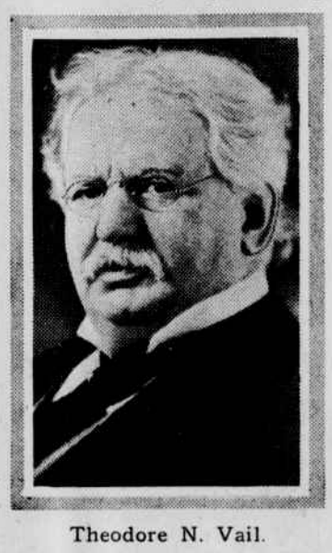
Capt. David W. Bone's tale of the sea, "The Brassbounder," which E. P. Dutton & Co. brought out in a new edition last spring, is being translated into Danish and is to be published within a short time in Denmark.

No one has yet discovered who wrote "The Mirrors of Washington."

He Made Neighbors of a Nation

IN ONE MAN'S LIFE! Chapters from the career of Theodore N. Vail. By Albert Bigelow Paine. Harper & Brothers.

THIS interesting chronicle, simple and forthright in expression, is exactly what the author says it is—the story of a man and a period. It is, in the main, a record of performance, with a somewhat inclusive background. As such it is both history and biography. Not only is it the life story of one of our great captains of industry but it is the romance of the development of a great industrial era. It is inspiring reading; its chapters do not blindly "celebrate" their subject nor present him in a false light with a foolish halo around his head. On the contrary, they provide a human account of a man of unusual mental endowment and enormous executive ability, who knew how to "carry through" in all his varied and gigantic undertakings in the face of adverse circumstances. They tell the story of the development of the telephone system from its very inception through



Theodore N. Vail.

all its stages of evolution. It is a story delightfully told, with plentiful high lights of humor.

Genealogy is usually laborious reading. Not so with the brief and interesting record given here. It traces the ancestry of Theodore Vail back to the days of the pioneers—about 300 years ago—to a certain Thomas Vail (or Veale), one of the religious self-exiles who came to America early in the seventeenth century—about 1647. It is interesting to note, as throwing light on their progeny, that his wife Sarah was a "resolute person with a potent vocabulary," for it is a matter of record that once when righteously defending herself in some debate she used such masterful language that she was brought before a magistrate and sentenced to stand with her tongue in a cleft stick "so long as the offence committed by her was read and declared"!

Theodore, one of a group of seven, made his appearance in 1845 in Carroll county, Ohio. "The discipline in the Vail household was strict at times," writes the author, "and corporal punishment by no means unknown. We suspect that Phebe Quinby had a busy and convincing hand and that little Theodore did not always escape."

At sixteen, after having received the rudimentary education which the public schools of Morristown afforded, young Vail displayed no unusual talent and was not regarded as even a promising boy. But his courage—the whole temper of his life—was foreshadowed in the words of that irascible old man, Judge Vail: "Davis, that boy is always whistling!" Throughout his entire career his spirit seemed to whistle above the conflict. As clerk in a drug store, where the American Magnetic Company had a telegraph office, Vail first felt the fascination of the wire. It meant to converse at long distance; it meant travel and a broader horizon. The quaint entries in his diary at this period show something of his mental progress, but nowhere do they give a hint of his ambitions for the future. In after years he used to say that his chief ambition then was to "own a sable coat and a ruby ring."

Somewhere there is this delicious bit of provincial recording: "In the evening I went up to Prayer Meeting and took a Lady home from such a place for the first time in my life; she in turn presented me with a Geranium leaf, which I kept as a memento." (!)

A little later Vail found a job in the office of the Western Union Telegraph Company at Fortieth street and Eleventh avenue, in New York city. The author here gives an interesting sidelight on these days: "Niblo's Garden was popular in that day, and it was there he saw 'Fanchon, the Cricket' and fell madly in love with Maggie Mitchell, who played the leading part. Tony Pastor's, then on lower Broadway, was a favorite resort, and Lester Wallack's another. Edwin Booth played 'Hamlet' for a hundred nights, and young Vail went as often as he had the money. He went sometimes when he didn't have the money—at least, when he had to borrow it, for these young men were always borrowing from one another and nearly always behind with their paymaster.

Next we find him going West with his family, who had joined the great exodus to the prairies. It was an unforgetable journey through deep, continuous woods and long, level fields. Chicago was then a "big, dirty town, with sidewalks that slopped down into the mud and water." Beyond were vast leagues of prairie grass. After a period of farming and school teaching in Iowa Vail went back to the wires again with a job as operator in a railroad office. Later he became a clerk in the mail service of the Union Pacific. Mail service was primitive in that day. Letters were often months on the road. Little geographical knowledge was required of the postal employee. Vail saw his opportunity. By means of a chart which he devised, showing connecting points, Vail planted the seed which grew into civil service reform. Later he was sent to Washington to develop with charts the idea of the distribution of mail on the cars in all the States, the biggest job ever given to one postal assistant. The idea of the fast mail was then conceived. On its first run it made forty-one miles an hour. Vail was now made General Superintendent of the Railway Mails. In seven years he had progressed by dramatic stages from the humblest to the highest place the department had to offer.

Meantime one of the greatest events in the history of the world had come about—the discovery of a device for transmitting speech by a magnetic wire. The early history of the telephone is drama with thrills in it.

Nationwide publicity was first given the neglected invention at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia when the Emperor of Brazil, after trying the instrument, exclaimed, "My God! It talks!" The newspapers next morning were full of the story.

The Bell Telephone Company was then formed with a meagre capital. Telephones were leased at the rate of ten dollars a year. It was at this time that the company acquired a manager—Theodore Vail. By the terms of the contract he was to have $3,500 for the first year and $5,000 for the second. The funds were lacking but Vail's faith was strong.

On July 20, 1887, the reorganization of the Bell Telephone Company with a capital of $450,000 was completed. The telephone of that day was still a crude affair, the ground was in most cases used for the return circuit, the wires were poorly insulated, there were distracting noises and the transmitter was primitive.

When a little later Francis Blake of Boston came forward with his new transmitter—one "as good as Edison's"—this invention put the Bell company on an equality with the Western Union and saved the day. Now began a great period in telephone history. Everybody wanted telephones. There was no busier place in America than the National Bell Telephone offices at 96 Milk street. Stock advanced from $50 to $350 a share. When later the Bell and Western Union combined forces it soared to $1,000 a share. Like his associates in the company, Vail now became undeniably rich for that day—was rated as a millionaire. The first thing he did was to cancel the mortgage on the Iowa farm for the home folks.

The following year he negotiated for the big Chadwick house and grounds at Roxbury, Mass. His hospitality became as wide as his fortune. Then he bought a farm near Lyndonville, Vt., which he called Speedwell Farms, and subscribed large sums for needed reconstruction of the village high school and other centres which had been closed for lack of funds. Later he established the Lyndon School of Agriculture for boys by giving Speedwell Farm as a gift to the State of Vermont, reserving for himself only the right of residence.

Meantime the great work of cabling the wires of New York and Brooklyn and putting them under ground had been going on. Vail gave the underground construction his close personal attention. By 1889 there were 11,000 miles of underground wire in New York city alone! At this point Vail, on the verge of nervous collapse, was obliged to withdraw from personal direction. Several quiet years at Lyndonville were followed by successful ventures in the Argentine. Years of sorrow, caused by the death of his wife and later of his son, followed. In May, 1907, he was elected president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. The era of his greatest work had begun. In 1909 he brought about the affiliation of the Western Union with his own company, only to see his labor thwarted by the Government.

In 1915 occurred the formal opening of the transcontinental line. The wires of the Pacific slope were linked with those of the Mississippi valley and the Atlantic seaboard. Watson in San Francisco now spoke to Dr. Bell in New York, using the words of the first transmitted sentence: "Mr. Watson, please come here. I want you." To which Watson replied, "It would take me a week to do that now!" Theodore Vail at Jekyl Island congratulated his colleagues and was himself congratulated by President Wilson, speaking from Washington.

In September, 1915, came the announcement of the success of the wireless telephone that was to give universal service and make a neighborhood of the entire world.

The closing chapters of the book are devoted to the story of how the telephone "went to war," and a detailed account of its Government control. Vail's unselfish attitude of service was manifest to all. In June, 1919, he retired as president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. In August of that year the Government handed back the wires to the owners.

Vail's big faith in humanity must have tipped the scales in his favor many times. Once he said: "I don't believe in anybody; but I have got faith in everybody." At another time: "I'd rather get cheated now and then than distrust everybody." And somewhere the author writes: "He never seemed more than a boy—a big child, in fact—to those of his intimate daily circle!" Perhaps this is the secret of all great men and women.

MARY SIEGRIST.